Amid tears and songs, 532 olim dock at Haifa after 3-day voyage
Odenheimer, Alisa
The Jerusalem Post (1950-2008); Jan 17, 1992; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Jerusalem Post
pg. 3A

Amid tears and songs, 532 olim dock at Haifa after 3-day voyage

ALISA ODENHEIMER

A boatload of 532 immigrants from all over the Commonwealth of Independent States arrived in Haifa port yesterday morning, after a smooth three-day voyage from Odessa.

Some of the immigrants on board, led by Israelis who had accompanied the ship, sang "Heveinu Shalom Aleichem," waved miniature Israeli flags and threw colored streamers as the "Mediteranean Sky" pulled into dock.

Others stood silently, weary from the journey and wary of what would come ahead.

Many had stood on deck from early morning, waiting to catch their first glimpse of the Promised Land.

"I feel very happy, very moved," said Alex, a 35-year-old dentist, as he gazed at Haifa for the first time. "Of course, I have butterflies in my stomach, the same kind of feeling that you might get before running a race. But I don't have any serious doubts, I know this is the right thing for me."

For many of the passengers, yesterday marked the end of an arduous journey, fraught with difficulties in getting from their homes to the port, a wait of four to five days in Odessa, and harsh treatment at the hands of the Ukranian customs authorities.

Unlike the previous two voyages, a group of Israeli journalists accompanied the immigrants on the voyage.

In Odessa, we watched for two days as the immigrants, weighed down by their belongings, straggled on board, some tearful, some joyous, all exhausted. The Ukranian authorities refused to let us disembark.

On the dock, friends and relatives of the immigrants gathered, standing for hours at a time, shouting across the void to those loved ones already on board.

As the boat pulled away, some of the immigrants cried brokenheartedly, waving to their relatives standing below, while others were seen throwing their leftover rubles into the sea.

"We're not going to need those anymore," explained one immigrant, who said that he was terribly relieved to be going to Israel.

On board, the olim went through the absorption process. Many could be seen consulting maps of Israel trying to decide where to make their new home.

In Haifa, the newcomers disembarked in the pouring rain. An ambulance was called to take one of them, a 92-year-old woman suffering from double pneumonia, to Rambam Hospital.

In one corner, those immigrants who had brought in videos and TVs stood in line at the customs station, some arguing that they were being asked to pay too much. Seven new personshad brought in cars, and one returning Israeli tourist had brought eight horses on the boat.

The Mediterranean Sky was chartered by Operation Exodus, a joint effort of two evangelical Christian groups: the British-based Ebenezer Emergency Fund and the American-based Exodus II. The voyages were arranged in conjunction with Odessa Israel, a group of Israeli businessmen, with the help of Ofek-Ride to Freedom, an Israeli-based non-profit organization.

This was the last of three experimental voyages sponsored by Operation Exodus, which hopes to bring 25,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union to Israel by boat, at a total cost of $10m-$12m.

The advantage for the immigrants in going by boat is that they are able to bring with them 250 kg. of baggage, instead of the 40 kg. limit imposed by the airlines.

It is unclear if the Israeli government will agree to continue to cooperate with Operation Exodus. Though the group signed an agreement not to engage in any missionary activity among the olim before, during or after the voyage, there were persistent rumors following the first two trips that there had been missionary activity on board.

For the third voyage, Absorption Minister Yitzhak Peretz sent a staff of 10 haredi representatives, mostly immigrants from the former Soviet Union, to observe the situation first hand; as well as to work with the immigrants.

During the 10-day voyage to and from Odessa, there was tremendous tension between the Operation Exodus group on the one hand, which included Christians and Messianic Jews, and Peretz's representatives on the other.

Despite the fact that Peretz had promised that the food would be strictly kosher, there was no kashrut supervision on board ship.

Herb Keinon adds:

An El Al charter arrived yesterday with 120 immigrants from Tashkent, the first direct flight from one of the former Soviet Union's Moslem republics.

Jewish Agency spokesman Gad Ben-Ari said that direct flights from Tashkent will now serve as the primary route to Israel for the estimated 200,000 Jews in the Moslem republics. Till now, the main route was through the Jewish Agency's transit station in Varna, Bulgaria.

The Tashkent-Tel Aviv route is part of the Jewish Agency's attempt to bolster the number of direct flights each week from the CIS. There are currently eight direct flights a week, a number likely to double by February.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.